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Owen Ireland Interview

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Dr. Owen Ireland Oral History Interview

Tuesday, August 19, 2018

Java Junction Café, Brockport, NY.

10:00 am

Interviewer: Erika Curtis

Forwarded to Owen Ireland 2-5-20

Review by Owen Ireland and forwarded to Bruce Leslie 6-5-20

Erika: So, where did you go to college and what lead you to Brockport?

Ireland: Two Big questions. I went to University of Toronto, St. Michael's College. The University of Toronto at that point was I think the biggest university in North America. About 35,000 students. But it was divided up into a number of colleges. St. Michael's College was one of these. It was a Catholic men's school. When I graduated from there, I was a major in Philosophy with a second field in British Literature.

The next question, how did I get to Brockport? I went home to Utica, New York after I graduated from St. Mikes and I began to look for a job. I soon and discovered that there weren't very many corporations in Utica hiring kids with Philosophy degrees so I had a construction job for a while, then I got a job coaching a football team at a local high school. In order to coach, I had to teach- something. They needed a social studies teacher so I commuted down to Colgate and got a masters in teaching secondary social studies. Well that lasted four or five years. I was less than successful as a football coach, but I loved to teach and I had really got into history. I wanted more history, so I thought, "why not go for a Ph.D. in history?" I went to the University of Pittsburgh, finished there and got my first full time college teaching job at Wilkes College at

Wilkes-Barre Pennsylvania. I started for I think, \$5,000 a year starting salary. And that was a real step up for us. At that time, Susan and I with four kids were living on a graduate assistantship of \$1500 a year and living in public housing. I used to tease my wife- she discovered so many ways to serve hamburger. We also ate lots of "meat pies". Ten for a dollar, no explanation of what the meat came from. I got my first college history teaching job at Wilkes College in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. Great school. Wonderful Provost who hired me and put up with me and my political involvement for 4 years. Susan and I organized the Wyoming Valley Committee of Concern to protest US involvement in Vietnam: a core of students, some Quakers and about 400 people in a five county. We so frightened President Johnson that he decided not to run again. I liked Wilkes. I liked the people at Wilkes but both Susan and I were kind of restless in a small city in northeastern Pennsylvania, so we jumped at a chance to come to cosmopolitan Brockport. The SUNY system opened. They had a job open at Brockport. I applied for it and got it and I've been here for 50 years.

Erika: So what was campus life like when you first arrived?

Ireland: Chaos. Confusion. Excitement. Fun You probably know all this and Bruce Leslie can correct me on my numbers but, in 1965 Brockport was a small kinda sleepy state teacher's college with about maybe 3,000 total students and 2 or 3 buildings at most. Hartwell- everything took place in Hartwell. Maybe 50-75 faculty members at most. They brought in the new president Al Brown and by the time I came here in 1968 it had grown very rapidly and by 1975 they had gone from 3,000 to 12,000 students and they had been putting buildings up everywhere. The number of faculty members had increased from 60 or 70 to somewhere in the neighborhood of 350. I think the biggest residential area on campus was in the P.E. [Physical Education]

parking lot where large numbers of kids were sleeping in the back seats of their cars. But, when you bring 12,000 people into a village that is only about 9,000 to begin with... It was absolute chaos but it was fun.

The History Department went from, I think there were 5 or 6 people there and in a matter of 3 or 4 years, we were 29 and a half full-time tenure track faculty. And it was a very exciting group of people. Almost all young, all beginning their careers in one way or another. Everyone had a Ph.D. I don't think there was a college then anywhere in the country that had a 100% Ph.D. and they were from great universities around the country. We had two guys from Yale, nobody from Harvard, Bruce from Princeton, and somebody from the University of Pennsylvania, somebody from John-Hopkins University, somebody from Chicago, somebody from Brooklyn, somebody from Wisconsin. So, the good side of this was everybody was bright, everyone was eager and everyone was enthusiastic. The downside of that was everyone had his or her own ideas, which was a real challenge to get that whole thing moving together in common a direction. It had a very dynamic chairman who died after about 5 years. That was very sad. He was about 48 years old, got cancer and died within a year. Then I became chair and that was an experience as well. So that's how I got to Brockport, that's what it was like. What a very exciting place to be.

Erika: So you mentioned you were chair, and I heard you were chair 3 separate times. Were there any sort of changes between each chair?

Ireland: A total of about 15 years. My first stint as chair I think began in 1976. When I became chair, we had 400 history majors. At the end of my first year we had 150. How is that for a success story?

Erika: Oh wow!

Ireland: All through my brilliant leadership! No. We discovered that almost every history major really wanted to be a Phys. Ed major but they had to have another major so they chose history. Brockport then allowed them to major in PE and most of them did. So, there we were: 30 full time tenure tract faculty members and 150 majors. The department responded creatively. We scrambled to figure out what we were going to do with ourselves. People responded very well. We found a whole variety of ways to be useful across campus. I'm sure you heard some of the stories: John Kutolowski developed a course on the history of sport which became a required course for the new P.E. major. His wife, Kathy Kutolowski developed a history of... oh what the hell was it... recreation and leisure because there was a new Recreation and Leisure major so then that became a required course. Kemp's Schnell took his sabbatical leave and went to the University of Iowa to study Criminal Justice and came back and taught the "History of Crime" and the "History of Violence" and these became required courses for the new criminal justice program. Some taught in The Alternate College; some developed overseas programs. I'm sure I'm missing some people but that's... that pattern, everyone was devising ways and means to allow the history professors, and history to permeate the campus. And were very fortunate because in the early '80s we had the great retrenchment, the college cut back, and there were I think 40 or 50 full time tenure tract faculty members that got fired and we didn't lose anybody because we had responded creatively. I think I served that one maybe 6, 8 or 9 years.

My second stint I think it was in 2000, 2001 when then chairman Bob Marcus suddenly died and I agreed to take over. That was a different kind of challenge. I'm not quite sure how to characterize it. Because it was fun but, I mean being chair of the History Department is never fun but it's a challenge. It's important. I served for three years and that's when we began to hire.

After the great retrenchment of the early 1980s, the department had slowly shrunk down to about 15 or 16 people and Bruce Leslie was the youngest person in the department so we were aging rapidly. We began to hire, we began to expand, and that accelerated very rapidly to where, I'm sure you know now there are only a couple of us old guys still around and I'm gone so now there are I think there's three maybe who go back to the earlier years and all these new people arrived, again from the best universities in the country, each with his or her own ideas of what the department should be. A lot of excitement and a lot of tension and kind of sorting things through.

And then my most recent tour as chair was I think 2012-2015. We'd been through a succession of GREAT chairs. Most recent chair was Allison Parker. She served for three years and said she couldn't do it anymore- did not want to do it anymore. And there was nobody foolish enough to take the job so I did it for another three years and the challenge there was mostly from external sources. We were engaged and responding to external demands to explain and defend what the hell we were doing, which was a nightmare. Typically, we responded very well and I don't think... we're putting this on record here so I have to be careful... I was never convinced that the external assessment, the pressures put on us from external agencies to assess what we were doing in the class room, I thought it was misguided from the beginning. Those who were enforcing it on us did not really understand what we did and didn't understand the purpose of our liberal arts education. [They] didn't understand and they treated it pretty much in a mechanical sort of way. They just saw it as, at the end of the year, students are supposed to know these five things and you give them multiple choice quizzes and then you've assessed them. I'm exaggerating to make the point. I believed then and I continue to believe that the only valid and useful assessment is the lives of our graduates. The people in the department responded quite well I think, and that's the end of my administrative experience.

Erika: So, you're a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor, which is obviously a great honor...

Ireland: It doesn't get much money! (Laughs)

Erika: (Laughs) Unfortunately! Can you describe your teaching style and if it has changed over time at all?

Ireland: Well I hope it has changed over time. That's a good question Erika, but I'm not sure I have an equally good answer for it. I really like my discipline. I really like history. Once I got to teach history at the collegiate level I thought I'd died and gone to heaven because my basic function was to read books and make undergraduates listen to me as I explained them. So that was for me the most exciting part of teaching was the ever captive audience. They've got to listen to you. You've got to stand up there and pontificate, and I never really lost that but I think I became increasingly aware of... no let me come at that from a different perspective. At the very beginning when I started teaching college history, particularly at Brockport, I had not given much thought. I knew a lot about history and I had been in a first rate graduate program and I was on the cutting edge of my discipline so from a professional point of view I was a well-trained, well-disciplined historian. But, in all that time I had never spent a lot of time thinking about why. How do I change this into meaningful experiences for undergraduates? So I spent a fair amount of time struggling with that question, I was at the end of my... I had been here about four or five years when a young woman, as a matter of fact she was a 35-year-old who had been a history major, graduated, had been an outstanding student and a year after she graduated she came back to me. She said, "you people cheated me." She said, "I can't get a job. There are no history jobs." It's true. But then I began- she's a resident of the village she may still be around. I wonder if she knows what an impact she had on me. But out of that came a protractive period of

thinking and talking with my colleagues about what it is we do. What's the purpose of a liberal arts education? How do we fit into that? Out of that kind of very... that was not an easy or simple process, but with a real insight, I don't know if you ever met Dr. John Kutolowski, but John was a very quiet, very wise colleague on whose judgement I came to rely very heavily. But out of that came our History Department's understanding of what it is we do. You may have heard me expound on this before, but the purpose of a liberal arts education is not to get you a job. The purpose of a liberal arts education, we defined it ... I think, generally our job is to first provide our students with a sophisticated understanding of how their world works and how it got to be that way, and provide them with an awesome set of analytical communication skills so they have a pretty good understanding of the world they live in. They developed analytical and communication skills that will allow them to build on that and to communicate what they know. Then, if we're really lucky, we've also provided them with four years in which to take... to think through what the hell they're gonna do with their the power we have given to you. In my mind we are empowering you. We're not giving you a job, we are freeing, we are liberating you, we are providing you with the skills, knowledge and understanding wisdom you need to do anything you wanna do. And if you decide you wanna be a historian, fine but that is not our reason for living. Once I came to understand that, then I think that began to have an impact on my teaching. Now did all that make sense to you?

I would hope somebody would have already been telling you these things. If you think about it, that kind of becomes the essence of liberating... it's a liberating experience. It frees you from ignorance, it frees you from... to communicate and it gives you time to figure out what the hell you're gonna do with these awesome tools we've provided that we kinda hope for most of you that you won't use that awesome power to enrich yourself but to build a meaningful life for

yourself to meet your social obligations; the obligation to the society that created you and nurtured you and brought you to this point in your life. That, over time, had an impact on my teaching and I became more aware of the importance of student research or the importance of student writing and rewriting. I don't know if you experienced that or if I made you do that in History 211 or not, but it seems to me that not only was I responsible for expounding, pontificating, in front of an audience but also responsible for demanding that you read and write and think and communicate effectively. So, overtime, I gave increasing emphasis to that direction of the academic experience.

Erika: How did you implement different curricular changes within the department?

Ireland: The chairs have virtually no power. It's all a question of pointing out problems and encouraging people to try and solve them. I would say in terms of curricular development, my experience as chair was to get the hell out of the way. I always believed that people do best in that which what they really love to do. And if I thought we ought to add a course on Tibetan Monasticism and no one was really interested, then so be it, right? But if I wanted to push my obsession then I would have had a chance to teach it. So I think that in terms of curricular development, and I don't think that when I was chair I differed from any other chair, I think we all kind of operated within that framework, that we needed kind of minimum structure for students to understand what courses to take and what seat counts. We needed to have some progression in their intellectual development. But within those very vague guidelines, faculty did those things they like to do most and I think most people still do. John Daly teaches everything, because he loves everything. Dr. Parker likes women's history and the [U.S.] constitution and

you see her in front of a class teaching the constitution she is just aglow. I mean, and that a key element in teaching. You can't drone on and on.

I'm sure you know about our program with Maynooth. I guess you can call that a curricular innovation, but during my second iteration as chair, 2000, 2001, Bruce Leslie and I talked one day. We used to have a lot of overseas programs in the History Department and they all atrophied. I said to Bruce, "you know if you're interested why don't you..." and Bruce is our international guy, you know he's been everywhere, done everything, knows everybody from God right on down... so I said maybe, "so why don't you look at Ireland and see if there are any opportunities." So he did, he really got hold of it and he discovered that the only Irish University that did not have a SUNY connection was Maynooth. So I said, "see what you can do." So he went over, met the chairman and the chairman was amenable. Bruce came back and said, "these guys are kind of interested." So Susan and I went over and had a very delightful 2 or 3 days with Vincent Comerford and his wife and felt that we were both thinking of things in a similar way and out of that came our connection with Maynooth. It has persisted since 2001 and I'm very excited we're gonna continue it. Very excited John Daly is willing to take over leadership of it and we're at the beginning... next week were engaged in a fundraising campaign to raise money to support that program. So, if I had any specific curricular impact on the department, that is all I can think of. So, I guess that's it.

Erika: So switching gears a little bit, what was the administration like under Albert W. Brown, and how was it different with presidents to follow?

Ireland: Al Brown was a fascinating guy. Fairly young, very energetic, very articulate, and a builder. I mean, he was responsible for Brockport the way it is today. Very intense- demanded a

lot of us and made us work hard. Interesting guy to deal with. His office was in Hartwell, my office was in Hartwell, the History Department initially, most of us were in Hartwell, and one night as an untenured faculty member I had worked late. It was 7:30- 8 o'clock when I left my office and I was going down the hall and I saw the President coming out of his office going towards me and I thought "he's gonna see me working late I can suck up here. This is very impressive, he's gonna congratulate me on that." Well, he stopped right in front of me, looked at his watch and he said "You must be very inefficient if you can finish your days' work by 6 o'clock." (Laughs). How's that? (More laughs). But that is the kind of guy he was. I never knew for sure. I think it was all tongue and cheek. I think he was Al Brown and he was always on, always ready. There was no casual. So he was building a first rate educational institution and I had enormous respect for him. We had our differences, I think almost every president I've ever worked for, occasionally we kind of crossed ways or we've had an issue with one and other but I had enormous respect for him. My favorite president was Paul Yu. I don't know if you've heard stories about that but at the point that Paul became our president, I think it was in '96, we were really in trouble. We were floundering. The enrollments had dropped, funding was questionable, the echoes of the retrenchment of the 1980s were still banging around people's minds. He turned the place around in a couple of years. Amazing phenomena. Drastically improved, drastically increased the number of applicants, drastically increased the quality of applicants, drastically increased the quality of the incoming freshmen class.

When I came here in '68, we were bringing in some of the best and the brightest kids in the state of New York, and they were coming here from, some from upstate New York, but at least a third, maybe a half of them were coming from Westchester and from Long Island and New York City and they were really top notch students. By the time Paul Yu came here, we were

bringing in some poorly prepared kids. It used to break my heart. We'd find a freshman that was really interested and then find that he's got to hide his grades because he's embarrassed by getting an A, because people would... well... and so by the time Paul Yu came it was a very discouraging place to work. He turned that around almost overnight. A brilliant problem solver, and I simplify the situation to make the point. And one of the consequences of the whole [deal] was we had empty dorm rooms. We couldn't fill up the dorms. The brilliant solution is that if you have two problems like that, the guy sees like other brilliant people, if you have two problems like that you put them together and make a solution. And he said, "why not give away dorm rooms to the brightest kids in the state of New York?" Think about it. It's up here where you've got two... your entrapped here, you're sinking and sinking and declining and declining you've got half of the dorm rooms on campus are empty, and so within a year, Bruce can give you the details on this but within a very short period of time he offered tuition waivers and a free room to the top students in every high school class in the state of New York. And that had an enormous impact. Suddenly, that guy from my freshmen class is some of the brightest kids in the state of New York, and then that feeds on itself because the guidance counselor in your high school or the guidance counselor in somebody's high school understands that last year the valedictorian of his school went to Brockport.

So, he's looking at his bright students and saying "Listen..." So it feeds on itself. By the time Paul had, and I had my arguments with Paul on one thing or another, that's the nature of being a faculty member, but he had transformed us. Physically, he had transformed the student body, and in the process he had transformed the spirit and the enthusiasm of the entire faculty. So that was, in terms of administrators, he was and remains my ideal. And that's a hard act to

follow. Another dimension of academic leadership at the... I think your question was on the administrators, right?

Erika: [yes]

Ireland: For reasons that are not altogether clear to me, public higher education in America and public higher education in the state of New York and to some degree, certainly in SUNY, there had been a trend towards... to simplify it Erika but I think it helps understand, we move from leadership to management. Paul Yu was a leader. Al Brown was a leader. He could, both of those men, could see problems, articulate the problem, bring us together, create a reasonable solution and move us ahead towards it. Increasingly, administrators at middle and upper level, and I think this is probably true in every state university system in the country, are managers. They're people who are, who see the faculty as employees to be managed rather than as teachers to be inspired. They see their function as discipline and getting more work out of lazy-ass college professors who only teach nine hours a week and don't do anything the rest of the time. I hope I get a chance to edit this! (laughs)

Erika: Yeah you will! Definitely.

Ireland: But, all of the men I worked for were good people- John Van de Wetering was a good guy. Came in, had to retrench 50 people, but saved our ass. John Halstead was a good man, and his academic advisor Anne Huot was a good, first – rate scholar teacher.

And our new president, President Macpherson is off to a strong start. She hasn't had a lot of time yet but she sure seems bright and articulate and hard-working , an PhD in English with an impressive scholarly record, and administrative experience in Great Britain. She invited one

of her former teachers to be the guest of honor at her inaugurations, thus honoring all teachers. She came here when we were on the verge of bankruptcy and she took over the Brockport financial crisis and within a year and half she solved everything. This is a young woman with talent.

But to go back to the broader issue: The downside of that management mentality... it has created a new career path for college administrators. They see themselves as temporary. They are here for only a few years and they need to do some conspicuous things that will allow them to move on to a new job at a bigger school. And that I think what I'm talking about is not a Brockport problem, but it's a public higher education problem. It takes time to come to know an institution. It takes time to come to understand and gain the trust of your faculty. Faculty you know, they're an ornery bunch! But on the other hand, they're some of the brightest goddamn people in America. And they're suckers for ideals. So you can lead them, you can inspire faculty, but it's harder than hell to herd them or to drive them. And we've been fortunate in the administration that we've had since Paul Yu, and these are all good people and they work very hard and they've got bright ideas and they... each has made significant contributions to the institution but I have a sense that they... how do I phrase this... given the nature of the recruitment process, given the nature of the evolution, if you will, of the institution of college presidencies, that they're under pressure to innovate and leave. And I used to tease Anne Huot that when she was... I had great admiration for her on a personal level, and she worked very hard and she did a number of good things for us. I said "you know Anne, you're gonna leave us in a while and then I hope your plans are good plans because if they fail, you're gonna be gone and we're gonna be left with the consequences." So this is not a... I'm answering a question about administrators here on a kinda nation-wide level I think. I think that they are good people but all

of us are now caught up in a new environment in which college administrators are under enormous pressure to innovate and build a reputation that will allow them to leave, to where... their career projector requires them to behave in certain ways that may or may not be altogether to the benefit, in the long run, to the benefit of the students. So that's... I'd be happy to get a chance to edit all of that.

Ireland: So to simplify all of that, the two men that seem to me to... the two men I've worked with, the two presidents I've worked for who have most impressed me were Al Brown and Paul Yu. All the other people I liked, respected, knew to varying degrees of kind of personal knowledge but those are the two that stand out to me, who at crucial points in our history, turning points, Al Brown created the institution and Paul Yu saved it. So... probably that's wise to be- (laughs) to move on.

Erika: (Laughs) So the social science history conferences: How did they begin and what were they like in their first couple years?

Ireland: We did that for 10 years, and it was very exciting. The first one as a matter of fact occurred at Cortland. A couple of people I knew down there wrote to the.... applied for a small grant from SUNY Central, they used to call them the "discussions in the discipline" I think it was. They could bring in a speaker and bring in some people from other campuses and it was very stimulating. And then so I came back to Brockport and John Ingham and I said, "well we can do that too." So we did and we liked that idea and we did that for 10 years. Social Science History was what it was called. John Ingham and I had both been educated at the University of Pittsburgh under Sam Hays, a brilliant young Ph.D. in History from Harvard who was encouraging the profession to rethink its approach to the study of history. To move it away from

dramatic narratives and to emphasize the analytical nature of this. To think of it-- the discipline of history-- in terms of accumulative effort rather than endless cycles of new interpretation. Think of it in terms of systematic methods, to think of it in terms of replication so if you publish your papers somebody else should redo the research to make sure you're right. But, in a broader kind of a sense, to define your concept precisely. To hypothesize causal relationships and devise research projects that would allow you to test those hypotheses and reject them or accept them and build them into an evolving interpretive framework. That still gets me all excited when I think about that kind of historical research.

So John and I had both been trained by Sam Hayes and once we got this thing started we relied very heavily on him and for 10 years we did an annual conference at the conference center. We would invite 6 or 8, maybe 10 of what we thought were the brightest young scholars in the field, and then invite others to join us. These young scholars would share their current research with the group. They wrote papers that were distributed in advance so that by the time you got here you were expected to have read them and then we we'd spend 3 days- Friday, Friday night, Saturday, Sunday. I think the biggest enrollment was 70 or 80 but just kind of deeply immersed in an isolated environment with nothing to do but talk about what we love most.

That continued for 10 years. But then some guys **Jerry Clubb** from Michigan and **Al Bogue** from Wisconsin, had been with us occasionally and then became increasingly interested in what we were doing and then they said, "why don't we move this to the next level and take it beyond Brockport? Create a national organization?" and out of that came the Social Science History Association which is a national organization with a regular conferences and a journal. So, on one level I think were disappointed but on the other hand all of us who had been involved in it took a great deal of pride in the fact that it had started here in upstate New York. And I think

that, at least in our minds that we'd been the center of an intellectual revolution. That the Brockport conference of Social Political History.

And the title is of some significance, it was Sam Hayes' phrase: Social-Political history. To root political history in the society to understand politics particularly, as a manifestation of social identities and social interactions. I still find that and I am very happy to be... it's what I'm doing right now, trying to get back into that, that kind of history research.

Erika: Okay so, another thing that you had a hand in starting was the freshmen convocation.

Ireland: Yeah, I forgot about that.

Erika: (Laughs) So what was the process like behind starting that and why is it important?

Ireland: **Roger Weir** was the president of the Faculty Senate, I was a member of the Senate at that point and we were concerned that the incoming freshmen didn't really know what they were getting into at Brockport. And, so he appointed a committee to think about ways we could acculturate incoming freshmen. That committee met for a year, year and a half and out of that came a proposal to the president that we have a ceremony that would include all new students, freshmen and transfers, and that it should take place near the end of the orientation program probably the night before the students first went to class, and that we should attempt in that to explain, illustrate and exemplify the values of a liberal arts education.

We spent a couple years putting the first one together. **Bob Strayer** became the physical face of that, he was very good with those kind of things. And then the committee... the president approved it and I'm sure you went through it at one point or other. But I think it still follows the basic pattern of a lot of noise and a lot of things going on saying colorful ways. It's a beautiful

way to kind of wake kids up at one point or other, so we wanted them to be alert and we also wanted to explain what we were doing and then to illustrate it with concrete, specific examples. So we were at least... and I think it's still there... at least we tried to, we wanted to bring back a very successful graduate who had succeeded in a field that was different from his or her major to kind of make the point that, as I made earlier, a liberal arts education prepares you to take advantage of the opportunities that arise. So I think the first guy was a sociology major who at that point had become president of one of the largest nonprofit or not-for-profit organizations dealing with all students with mental disabilities. And then we brought in... well that pattern, I think they still continue it and bring back a prominent alum. I don't know if they emphasize the degree to which his or her current occupation is not directly, immediately related to the undergraduate major but then to highlight some of our most successful current undergraduates and provide one or two of the with some exposure to talk about their experiences. I can't remember what else is involved in that but I think those were the key elements. We wanted them to... I think at one point we wanted early on, we had a faculty member explain what he or she was doing with it but that didn't really work very well, nobody was really interested in that, so. But that's- and if I made a contribution at all to that I think I was... I always believed in commencements, because it's a ritual. Maybe that's my Catholic background and Catholics are into rituals but I believe that saying something is good, but enacting it is even better and that the... I've been here for a long time and I think in that 50 years here at Brockport I didn't miss very many graduations because I think we as faculty have an obligation to be there but also its an opportunity to kind of mentally reaffirm what it is we are doing. I think, kinda stop everything, stop the day to day routines and you set aside a time and a place and create a ceremony that suddenly compels people to think about what it is they're doing and reaffirm their commitment

to that goal. So I pushed very hard in that subtle sort of way, well maybe not so subtle, to emphasize the ritual natures of these things so the sequence of behaviors that- to which we express what we are. I think that's the key to its success, the key to its perpetuation. People, faculty, students, administrators go away with that with a little bit of luck, go away with saying it's been a meaningful experience. So that's it.

Both: laugh

Ireland: I chaired the committee that created that institution and I chaired the committee for 5 years. Then a number of brilliant people took over. Allison Parker did that for a long time too and did a great job with it. I don't know who is doing it now but it continues to be a very impressive. We were also very excited about it because it was not something the administration had imposed on us, not one more duty we had to fulfill, but it was a academic function that emerged from... and it articulated the values of... the faculty and it was one we really had to fight to get them to put up the money to support it. I thank President John Van de Wetering for that. I don't know I think we did that in the 1980s? Well, yeah probably.

Erika: Okay, so I have two questions left. So where do you see, or what do you see for the future of this institution?

Ireland: I think in some ways that, Erika, I've offered you a context in which to help you think about that. I think the challenge of public higher education is to regain its soul. To regain its identity. One of the things that enthused me about Brockport when I came here, that continues to enthuse me, is that I see public higher education as a vehicle for enhancing the life success of children who do not come from privileged homes to kind of keep the American system open.

[To] provide opportunities for young people of intellectual potential and the personal discipline and provide them with an opportunity to expand their intellectual world, to get excited about ideas and to be empowered with the liberal arts knowledge and intellectual skills and values and to put them into a position to compete not for the highest positions although many of them do achieve it, but to compete for an opportunity to- for a fulfilling life. It would involve social responsibilities, personal security and open the door if you will to young people who can make a living doing things they would do if they didn't have to make a living. To find a way to live that is consistent with their talents and their ideals and their values and their social responsibilities. A device if you will, to beat back against the waves of privilege, a means of ensuring that power does not- power, wealth, prestige in America- does not consolidate and perpetuate itself in increasingly concentrated ways. And I think that's the soul of public higher education. And I think that is in danger because I think there are powerful interests in America who understand what it's doing and don't want to pay for it. I think that's the fundamental challenge; how to maintain that lofty purpose in an environment that is increasingly hostile and stingy. And in demanding that we produce students who are trained for particular jobs- vocational training... which is perfectly fine but it's not the purpose of the... seems to me not the purpose of public higher education. How to deal with that is the greatest change that Brockport and every public institution of higher education in America might face is how to... University of Toronto, I told you I went there 1955, it was a huge institution and one of the best Universities in North America, but University of Toronto is a Public University. My tuition my first year was \$200. From one of the best universities in North America. 200 bucks. When I began teaching at Brockport, tuition was ZERO . That's an ideal that we have lost and it makes me sad.

But, part of it is that at St. Mikes, I lived in a beat-up, lumpy old dorm, 3 or 4 of us to a room. There were no frills. St. Mike's was a Catholic College. There was a certain discipline but that- in some ways it's amazing, we assembled in the main floor of the dorms every night at around 6:30pm for prayers, we knelt on the tile floor for a half an hour and then we went to our rooms and studied and we would be in our room at our desks, no music, no sound, no nothing with our door open. There was a Procter in the hall who kept an eye on us. At 11 o'clock Father O'Toole would pull the switch on us, the lights went out, we went to sleep. 6-7 o'clock in the morning the lights went back on. Father was there pounding on the door saying "get up, get going, go to mass, go to breakfast, go to the library." That's what we did. One night out a week and we could stay out 'till 11 o'clock. I came from upstate New York where the drinking age at that time was 18 and you were drinking at 16 so I had been drinking in high school. I never... I don't think I ever had a drink for 4 years at the University of Toronto. It was, you're here for a serious purpose, and I was... St. Michael's college was I think formed by the theology, the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. It's an intellectual institution and the argument there was you've got 4 years to really come to understand what the world is like and how your fit into that world and develop a set of values to guide you and a set of concepts to help you understand what the purpose and the meaning of life is and how you're gonna fit yourself into that. So it was almost monastic.

Today it's a different world and I don't think the average 17 to 18-year-old is ready to make wise decisions in the use of their time. And I think that pattern, that has come to dominate is higher education had put together a bunch of 17 to 18-year-olds and throw them into a context where they're responsible for themselves with minimum supervision and very few rules and regulations and, at the very least, it distracts them from why they're there but at the worst it

destroys them... the lives of far too many young people. And then we begin to add to the cost of this operation not by improving the quality of the instruction, not by improving the quality of the library collection, not by building new laboratories but by building SERC and the faculty office building and a beautiful new dorm. We are competing not on the brilliance of our program, not on the success of our graduates, but on our catering to the superficial consumer-oriented demands of a crowd of 18-year-olds. And it's not their fault, how do they know? That's why their coming to us, to understand. But, if you're selling Brockport on the basis of SERC, well you're stupid not to because it's an extraordinary and valuable asset, but if that's why kids are coming here then we already start with a problem.

I sat in some pretty lousy classrooms. It never bothered me. The environment is not why you are there. What turned me on, what probably turns you on, what turns good students on is the intellectual engagement. Much of what we are, much of the trend in public higher education at least is to distract students from their real job. And many of them turn out brilliantly anyway. Do you know, have you ever heard of **Scott Flieger**?

Erika: No.

Ireland: He will be here for the 50th anniversary of the... he's a benefactor of the college. He is very generous with his... Scott was one of those bright young people who came up to us from Long Island in the late '70s early '80s, and I think he's just retired. He was senior executive Vice President at Deutsche Bank, one of the top 4 or 5 people in that world international institution. But he always praised the liberal arts education and he comes back occasionally and says to our undergraduates, "I'm in banking. I was a history major and I'm an international banker." Think about that.

Erika: Yeah.

Ireland: Anyway... what the hell was the question?

Erika: (Laughs) Where do you see the future of the institution? I think it was a good answer.

Erika: (laughs) And just lastly, what did you most enjoy about your time at Brockport?

Ireland: I've been here for 50 years and this dilemma I have never been able to satisfactorily resolve for myself. I have 3 jobs: I'm a teacher, I'm a scholar, and I wanna run the institution. And I've been trying to find a workable balance between those three for my entire life. And now I'm no longer teaching and I'm no longer aspiring to run the institution and now all I'm doing is scholarship and I love that but my career has always been a blend of those and I'm not sure I ever got... I never got the perfect blend and many times I got far too involved in one at the expense of the others. But I think for me, for my personality, for my intellectual needs I never achieved a good balance among them at any given time but I think the presence of those three opportunities made my professional career very satisfying. Am I answering the question?

Erika: Yeah!

Ireland: So the obvious upside to that is now I'm retired, and I can do all my research which is very exciting but I still wake up in the middle of the night thinking about how I would run this institution if I were in charge.

Same thing, I read a new book and go "wow, I'm gonna throw this into my lecture and then I realize there is no lecture. So that's all good.